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UNCLAS BUDAPEST 001929

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DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO NSC - DAMON WILSON

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: BUDAPEST DEMONSTRATIONS: ENTER STAGE RIGHT

REF: BUDAPEST 1913 AND PREVIOUS

1.(SBU) Demonstrations against the Gyurcsany government declined in attendance September 21-22, without the violence of previous nights. Crowds at Parliament square were noticeably smaller according to police on the scene. Local authorities estimate the evening crowd at 4,000; fewer than 100 by early morning. Authorities report only a handful of arrests on vandalism charges overnight.

2. (SBU) Embassy contacts have increasingly voiced frustration with what they regard as misleading reporting of the week's events in the international press, and understand that the continuous news coverage impacts on Hungary's international reputation. PM Gyurcsany has responded to opposition claims that he is the problem by commenting "I may be a problem for the opposition ... but I am the solution for Hungary."

3. (SBU) Sources within the governing coalition report that party unity is holding. Indeed, SZDSZ officials believe the protests and the press coverage will prove counter-productive for the opposition in that they will actually increase turn-out among SZDSZ and MSZP party members on October 1.

4. (SBU) There is considerable relief following FIDESZ's decision to cancel a planned rally September 23 (reftel), which might have provided a flashpoint for violence. However, the extreme right-wing MIEP party has reportedly planned marches culminating in a demonstration downtown September 22. (Comment: MIEP has failed to win sufficient votes to be represented in Parliament. Its leader, Istvan Csurka, is perhaps best remembered for his post-9/11 comment that the U.S. "had it coming." End Comment.)

5. (SBU) Comment: Although peaceful demonstrations against the government's policies continue in front of the Parliament, they are both limited in number and distinct in the public mind from the criminal actions of extremists. The Prime Minister has admitted responsibility for his statements on the "Gyurcsany tape" but not wavered in his commitment to restore order and to continue reform. End Comment.

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